

# Culturing Volunteers: volunteer programs in collecting institutions

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Victoria hosts an impressive number and range of organisations that are collection custodians and an equally impressive number of volunteers that operate community museums and support paid staff in institutions with collections valued in the millions. Leigh Kinrade outlines some of the factors involved in managing these significant volunteer numbers.



The Cultural Volunteer Coordinators Group (CVCG) based in Victoria is a forum for managers of volunteer programs to share information and discuss issues relating to the cultural volunteering sector. Members include managers of volunteer programs from performing arts agencies and education providers as well as cultural collections. Volunteer programs range from relatively single-purpose (the Jewish Museum of Australia and Old Treasury Building maintain core groups of volunteer tour guides) to extremely large scale, multi-site volunteer programs at Museum Victoria and Zoos Victoria, managing hundreds of volunteers.

Often, potential volunteers will have a romanticised notion of the possible tasks they'll undertake, particularly within cultural or educational institutions. Volunteering within such organisations might bring to mind images of re-shelving library books within the State Library, restoring artworks at National Gallery of Victoria or tending to animals at Melbourne Zoo. It is common for people not to take the time to read about the types of work offered in a volunteer program and to be disappointed when they realise their dream job is not offered to volunteers. A formal principle of volunteering upheld by Volunteering Victoria and reflected in the National

Standards of Volunteering from Volunteering Australia is that volunteers will not be used for work that is a designated paid position—many of those dream jobs are core business for these organisations and as such are only appropriate for paid staff to undertake.

By the same standards, meaningful work needs to be provided to volunteers. Often this is through 'adding value' to cultural collections. Volunteers in public education programs and voluntary tour guides allow people to interpret collections in a more meaningful and personal way. Volunteers provide a means of large scale data capture, adding information to catalogues and databases to better service users of the collection in a way that would be impractical for paid staff to undertake.

While volunteer labour in itself is freely given, volunteer programs are not free to manage and in fact can be resource heavy. Larger institutions need to support staff who manage volunteers, provide training and find budget to resource the consumable elements of the program. At Public Record Office Victoria we maintain a core group of 120 volunteers who work on an average of fifteen different cataloguing and conservation projects. As well as providing resources and consumables for volunteers to undertake this work, staff time spent supporting

Below left: A volunteer at the Public Record Office Victoria working with State Electricity Commission glass slides.

Right: A volunteer undertaking collection management work within the repository of Public Record Office Victoria.

Photos courtesy of Public Record Office Victoria.

volunteer operations needs to be factored into the overall cost of the volunteer program to the organisation.

Given these costs, why does virtually every cultural institution host some form of volunteering program? Cultural collections require ongoing care and maintenance, while the majority of this work may have to be the job for 'professionals' there are many opportunities to provide volunteer positions to assist along the way. Indeed, the budget for paid staff often does not permit otherwise valuable work to be done.

It is important not to ignore the work done by volunteers in smaller community based organisations. Many of these organisations are not only staffed by volunteers, they are managed by a voluntary board of management. The work involved in attending board meetings and associated administration, managing rosters and juggling finances is by no means light and can be at times stressful. Often overlooked aspects such as: negotiating with councils; contracting building works and maintenance; writing proposals for grant money; coordinating fundraising; and ensuring insurance and council regulations are met, can and do become draining for even the most dedicated volunteer.

Larger organisations don't necessarily need a volunteer program to survive. Perhaps paradoxically this means that they need to be very clear as to why they have a program. There are many well-meaning people who want to volunteer and it is important to balance their needs with those of the organisation. At Public Record Office Victoria our volunteers provide over 20,000 hours annually and every project they undertake supports the points of our corporate plan 'build collection support' and 'promote collection usage'. As long as the National Standards through Volunteering Australia are met, volunteers can provide a meaningful, value added experience to their collecting institution.

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*If you would like further information about the Cultural Volunteer Coordinators Group feel free to contact: [leigh.kinrade@prov.vic.gov.au](mailto:leigh.kinrade@prov.vic.gov.au)*